# The Influence of Political Memes on Political Marketing Strategy in Malaysia

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## Abstract

Rapid development and quick-moving media not only change how people behave and communicate but also completely alter the marketing approach used to promote politics to maintain political power. The usage of memes in politics has also altered the agenda-setting of social groups that are concerned with Malaysian politics. This study aims to examine the impact of political memes on Malaysian youth, particularly on their decision to vote in general elections at the age as early as of 18. It also tries to examine the elements that make

memes effective political marketing tools. Using a quantitative study involving 400 young people, it discovered that politics and memes had an impact on the younger generation. Further study is imperative to investigate on the young people preference that influenced their political decision making.

**Keywords:** new media, election, party politics, agenda setting

## 1. Introduction

In the modern era, since the internet has integrated with information technology and has no geographical limits, it serves as a vital platform for global communication. According to a survey released in July 2023, there were 4.88 billion social media users active globally, with 5.19 billion active internet users around the world (Petrosyan, 2023). This is equivalent to 64.6 percent of the world's population as compared to 53.9 as of 2022 (International Telecommunication Union, 2023). Younger generations between the ages of 16 and 24 are tracked as a cohort based on consistency in comparison and age as the longest stay online (Petrosyan, 2023). Data from 2017 showed that 71% of the total internet users are the youth (Pew Research Center, 2018) but was increased to 75% as of 2023 (Petrosyan, 2023).

Research by Pepinsky (2015) shows that Malaysia is currently dealing with the political effects of recent media development, particularly in the area of political liberalization. This is due to the contemporary emergence of a form of media on the internet that was considered independent and to be exempt from governmental censorship. This only allows anyone to report news that has not already been covered by print or broadcast media. As a result, it is important to consider the law's prepared protections against social media and electronic media seriously. This is being done to preserve both the sensitivity of the nation's multi-ethnic population and the elements of the sons of the soil (Afi Roshezry Abu Bakar & Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah, 2021). It is not directly fostering a more active and direct engagement between the public and political figures (Boulianne, 2015). Numerous social media platforms, including blogs, vlogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, and others, have made it easier for people to take part in politics and other aspects of governance.

Not only do individuals use the internet to consume media; they can also evaluate it, take part in its development, and influence the critical conversation (Mogensen, 2014). One of the things currently saturating communication of the newest involvement is a "meme." Politics are debated and presented in a variety of ways on social media across a wide range of platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. One such method is the comic strip meme. Meme comics, in fact have proliferated in Indonesia's online after the 2014 presidential election and have played a key role in the country's political discourse (Aminulloh et al., 2022).

### 1.1 Political Memes

The word "meme" (pronounced "mim") comes from the Greek word "mimema," which meaning "imitation." Memes represent culture in the shape of a person's appreciation, thoughts, behavior, and emotions toward something that becomes his obsession, whether it is something he loves, hates, or finds unattractive. A meme can be expressed through images,
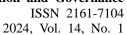
text, or video and can take the form of a story, satire, or sarcasm. The image that is displayed in a meme is typically an expression of a human or animal, a celebrity, or a political figure that is being discussed. Therefore, meme politics, which is a meme that includes political features.

In his book "The Selfish Gene," Richard Dawkins, a pioneer in the study of memetics, introduced the term "memes" (Dawkins, 1976). The word "meme" comes from the Greek verb "mimeme," which meaning "to imitate". The idea behind this later gained popularity as a cultural phenomenon. With the development of the internet and digital technology, the phrase "Internet Meme" has gained enormous popularity. According to certain research, the usage of meme politics in digital media shows that it can enhance people's attention to and awareness of politics. In fact, it has the power to affect people's knowledge of current and past political events, as well as to improve that knowledge (Kasirye, 2019). It has been commonplace to find remarks and photographs of humor about the leader and party politics online without considering a person's position or status, and it can be found on a number of social media platforms (Chagas et al., 2019; Kasirye, 2019).

*1.2 Trajectory of Social Media in Malaysia*

Memes were used extensively during the most recent 15th General Election in Malaysia across many social media platforms. It cannot be denied that, following PRU 14, the influence of the meme among young people in the social media sphere succeeded in altering Malaysian politics once more. 7.8 million voters, or approximately 50% of the population under the age of 15, to a total of 21 million voters, becoming the major force in the media and social media battle between the opposing parties (Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah & Afi Roshezry Abu Bakar, 2022) intriguing to talk about is how much political memes affect voters of Generation Z, or the younger voters that participated in the PRU 15 election, where over 4.5 million of them are under the age of 21 (Nizah & Sharif, 2020).

In Malaysia, where no one party or coalition was able to establish a government, the youthful generation, represented by those aged 40 and under, has managed to reshape the political landscape. This is evident from the figures in PRU 15 from the last election. This generation, which represents about 50.47 percent of the 21,173,638 million voters, is a significant shift from 15 years ago. In fact, according to figures from the year 2022, Malaysians use nearly 15 distinct social media platforms to achieve the diverse goals of their daily lives (Mohamad Afzanizzam Zahran & Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah, 2022). WhatsApp is the most popular social media network in the nation, with a total usage rate of 93.2 percent, followed by Facebook (88.7 percent) and Instagram (78.3 percent). However, since the inference of this, Tik Tok's use has become more popular and aggressive, with 53.8 percent of its 14.59 million users—users who are at least 18 years old, that using the app daily (Mohamad Afzanizzam Zahran & Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah, 2022; Sapag M. et al., 2023). This is not exactly indicating whether social media is a vital and integral part of every person's everyday life in the nation (Dilon, 2020). There is, in fact, a younger generation today that uses alternative apps and new media like the internet for political purposes. As an illustration, YouTube is used as a private video sharing platform and is used to download or upload videos with

political overtones (Bowyer et al., 2017). Additionally, social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, now known as X, and the app WhatsApp play crucial roles as sources of information and opportunities for engagement in the political sphere.

In truth, since Malaysia's general election in 2008, party leaders and other members of the political class have turned to social media as a crucial instrument for spreading their views on a range of political issues (Nizah & Bakar, 2019). More than 70% of respondents, between the ages of 18 and 40, expressed interest in the viewpoints of politicians who shared them on social media. The respondents also mentioned that they were eager to read news articles or information about a candidate's political beliefs that were posted on social media. This demonstrates the current state of society, which is especially evident in what is broadcast on social media regarding politically charged events (Salman et al., 2018). In fact, the research he conducted that resulted in the selection of Malaysia's 14th General Election in 2018 demonstrates how social media like Facebook and WhatsApp play a crucial role in disseminating political information and influencing voter opinion. The results of the study conducted by Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah & Afi Roshezry Abu Bakar (2021) revealed that WhatsApp played a significant role in Malaysia's general election marketing and campaigning. The trend is now following suit with the advance of new media such as TikTok, which has certainly hyped political participation in Malaysia (Mohamad Afzanizzam Zahran & Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah, 2022).

### 1.3 Memes as Political Marketing Strategy

The total duration of the clip video was short, which allowed many people to share it on social media sites like Facebook, which succeeded in getting people's attention and altering their preferences. This is highly abnormal currently. The 14th General Election results for 2018 make it very clear how social media must reflect voter decisions, which matters in politics. In fact, the situation is further explained as to why and how information-finding activities in politics can be seen as an alternative to the method of off-line, which can be used to communicate with a friend, chat, ask questions, or practice, and share opinions or information with others about things that are related to the political issue (Abdullah et al., 2021). But what is anticipated is that political parties and social media users would be more responsible, mature, and constructive while posting or sharing any material politics to avoid any unintended effects that could undermine the country's stability and unity (Afi Roshezry Abu Bakar & Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah, 2021). With the growth of social media use in a very widespread manner, political satire (memes) and Internet trolling have emerged as the next forms of communication (Raja Zulkifi et al., 2018).

A satire or meme is frequently utilized by the community nowadays, particularly by the new generation Z, as a means of expression and communication. According to a study by Azira & Yusof (2021), generation Z refers to people born after 1998 (O'Regan, 2000) and those who live in digital culture have a higher rate of meme use than other generations. In fact, according to Anastasia Pelot (2019, 2021) a studies that was conducted revealed that 38% of users of media social, aged 13 to 35, follow some account of the meme in the media social, and 55% of users, aged 13 to 35, send memes every week. Statistics have shown that memes

are a helpful and significant way of communicating for the next generation. This is so that things that are serious can be delivered in a way that is less formal, straightforward, humorous (and pokes fun at us), and easily comprehended (Nieubuurt, 2021).

The message meme grew increasingly popular among the younger age group because it offered a level of originality that better described the reality of the built-in social players in politics, advertising, and media (Nieubuurt, 2021). This phenomenon occurred due to the strength of the internet in social media, which provides the possibility to comprehend the needs of the spontaneous people of many to produce, generate, or receive a message meme without restrictions (Huntington, 2017; Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah & Afi Roshezry Abu Bakar, 2021) This technique is also innovative in spreading the word through memes until it is well welcomed by all parties, becomes quickly viral, and is accessible to a large number of people at any moment.

Since the 2016 election of the president of the United States, the United States meme has been viewed as having a key role in western politics. In the 2016 election for president of the United States, meme politics were used to discuss politics under the guise of entertainment, and a large number of young voters formed their political opinions based on memes of the political from social media (Alex, 2016; Bulatovic, 2019; Douglas, 2016). From one generation to the next, most young people will be more likely to understand the subject of politics and view memes as an essential type of knowledge. By doing so, the author of the political meme will continue to express and demonstrate their political beliefs through the creation of political memes, which they will then share with many individuals without regard to the meme's quality. As an illustration, the meme concerning Donald Trump's proposed wall between the United States and Mexico (refer to Figure 1) demonstrates that most Americans do not favor his plan, which is receiving a barrage of criticism from various parties on social media (Stewart, 2019).



Figure 1.

source:
https://img.buzzfeed.com/buzzfeed-static/static/2017-01/25/12/asset/buzzfeed-prod-web-08/sub-buzz-26322-1485364055-1.jpg?downsize=700%3A%2A&output-quality=auto&output-format=auto

The study conducted by McLoughlin & Southern (2021) in the 2017 British elections demonstrated the existence of a high level of participation in the use of political memes. In the 2017 election year, memes that are not static (which are based on a video or GIF) achieved more than 45 million views. In fact, political memes have been employed during the election of the president in Indonesia since 2014 covering various areas of potential and scope, from insulting to civic potential (Dewi et al., 2017; Mahadian & Hashim, 2022; Pratiwi Utami, 2023; Theisen et al., 2021). This is not a direct demonstration of political memes that give the impression of being highly profound and powerful in relation to political concerns. Thus, it can be assumed that political memes are growing and becoming more influence in shaping public perception. It also does have a significant role in political marketing strategy.

This study will examine the relationship between political memes and young voters at 15th Malaysian General Election. In addition, the study examines the interaction between memes and politics, as well as how the belief in politicians is shaped by memes. The usefulness of the political meme in providing information, the efficiency of the political meme's dissemination, the public's comprehension of the political issue, and the meme's role in the creation of political beliefs will be analyzed. The quantity of political memes will only increase as time passes; therefore, it is crucial to conduct study on the relationship between political memes and political issues. When the time comes, it is believed that the study will be able to provide a novel perspective on the research of political memes.

## 2. Method

This is a quantitative study. The strategy of the study is a cross-sectional survey that focuses exclusively on the young people with age range of 18 to 25 years. Random sampling is utilized to determine the number of respondents whose responses may be relied upon and certified. For every 100,000 members of the sample population, a total of 384 valid and trustworthy responders can be considered (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The instrument of the study, in turn, is comprised of self-constructed and administered questions. The set of questions is organized into four sections: part of the demography, the visibility of memes, the efficacy of memes, and the conduct of memes. The format of the question consists of both Yes/No and Likert scale questions, with option 1 indicating strong agreement and option 5 indicating strong disagreement. With a Cronbach Alpha rating of 0.916%, all questions have been confirmed to be reliable. In this manner, all the questions are appropriate for this study. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 is then used to analyze the data descriptively.

## 3. Results

The total number of respondents who received a set of questions disseminated randomly over the Internet via the Google Form application is 435. However, only 400 responders are analyzed for the subsequent procedure. This is because the forms filled out by responders are incomplete and could be disregarded. Thus, once the examination data collection procedure is complete, only 400 responders will be analyzed to obtain information for reporting purposes.

For part 1, the questions related to the demographics of the respondents, the findings of the data are as follows.

Table 1. Gender of Respondents

|  | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 152 | 38.0% |
| Female | 248 | 62.0% |

As shown in Table 1 Gender of Respondents, based on the data in the table's header, the proportion of female respondents is greater than that of males. This may also be attributed to the fact that there are more female students than male students. This is something that all Malaysian university campuses have in common. It is not unusual as gender do have differences on participation and understanding of memes (Bensaber, 2020).

Table 2. Groups Age

|  | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| 18-21 | 262 | 65.5% |
| 22-25 | 138 | 34.5% |

In terms of age, as displayed in Table 2 Groups Age, this study is intended for students or even young individuals. In this manner, the proportion of 18- to 21-year-old respondents accounts for 65.5 percent of the total sample size. This is consistent with the findings of the literature that the young, or the generations Z and Alpha, are more likely to use social media and to spend more time on social media than older generations (Nieubuurt, 2021). It is also significant since the filling or substance of the research focuses on the young individual.

Table 3. Groups Ethnic

|  | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Malay | 283 | 70.8% |
| Chinese | 80 | 20.0% |
| India | 18 | 4.5% |
| Ethnic Sabah | 9 | 2.3% |
| Ethnic Sarawak | 7 | 1.8% |
| Other | 3 | 0.8% |

In addition, for the retrieval of the data group ethnic, Table 3 Group Ethnic demonstrates that there are more Malay respondents than any other ethnic group. Obtaining a sample size that closely represents the composition of the Malaysian population is one of the obstacles faced by researchers. The survey questionnaire was designed for a simple random sample, and respondents were instructed to utilize the service online. By this point, it will be tough to recruit responders from the different ethnic groups, but this should not be a problem. This is

because the range of different data retrieval for community demographics is comparable. Aside from that, to ensure the integrity of the poll, each respondent can only answer the question once. This is done to assure the data's integrity and trustworthiness. Given the variety of respondents, it does reflect the demographics of Malaysian society.

Table 4. Job Status

| Student | 362 | 90.5% |
|---|---|---|
| Self-Employed | 16 | 4.0% |
| Private Employee | 15 | 3.8% |
| Civil Employee | 7 | 1.8% |

Table 4 records the type of job held by most respondents in this study. Students was the largest group of respondents, for purposes of determining employment status. It was followed by groups classified as self-employed or gig economy workers, private sector employees, and government employees.
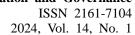
Table 5. Memes Visibility

| | | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I received a message as shown via WhatsApp. |  | Yes 209<br>No 191 | 52.3%<br>47.8% |
| 2. I received the video My Sejahtera (My Way) by Azman Naim via WhatsApp. | <br>Source:<br>azmannaim44mantra | Yes 261<br>No 139 | 65.3%<br>34.8% |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3. I received a message as shown via WhatsApp. | | Yes | 227 | 56.8% |
| | | No | 173 | 43.3% |



| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4. I received a message as shown via WhatsApp. | | Yes | 213 | 53.3% |
| | | No | 187 | 46.8% |



| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5. I received a message as shown via WhatsApp. | | Yes | 227 | 56.8% |
| | | No | 173 | 43.3% |

Table 5 Memes Visibility relates to questions that were constructed and posed to respondents regarding the visibility of images and videos that can be classified as memes. There are four political-themed photos and one video. All shown photos and memes may have been viewed by respondents before the study is conducted.

Although there are differences between respondents who did see and those who do not ever see the image-as shown are not statistically significant (with a range of up to 10 percent), the video by Azman Naim 44 Mantra about Covid 19 with the mode of parody of My Way by Frank Sinatra has the highest proportion of the received videos. The video has gotten 647,000 views on YouTube, as indicated by a revision.

Based on five questions that concisely relate the political visibility of memes, practically all the study's respondents had received the memes. The researcher expects that respondents will receive those photos and video at the time of their presence or if comparable instances occur. This is because social media is never separated from the news and the reemphasis of previous images, which can lead to confusion.

According to this study's findings, nearly all respondents have viewed the images and videos. This suffices to demonstrate the effectiveness of memes in communication as simplicity, conciseness, and accuracy of information become the advantage factors. This has proven as General Election of 2023, academics and social media experts anticipate memes will continue to dominate the conveyance of the message to voters (Alia Kamelia, 2022; Farhan Shahmi Abdullah, 2023; Sapag M. et al., 2023). And it will continue to increase in the near future.

## 4. Discussion

In general, the political meme is a highly efficient method of one-to-one presentation of information, commentary, criticism, and even political marketing. Data of post General Election 15 demonstrating the popularity of political memes among young voters aged 18 to 21. This study proved those claims, although further studies need to be undertaken. There are various factors that influence such a situation. This is due to characteristics of memes that present understandability, conciseness, and compactness. This contributes to the interest creation among young people. Humor also contributes to the use of political memes among young people (Azira & Yusof, 2021). Another plus factor for the higher interest in memes is that it accounts for the platform's usage by several social media's most prominent users. Familiar faces, artists, influencers, even the politicians themselves contribute to the higher interest in memes. Another important aspect is that memes travel, transport across borders (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017). Thus, as memes become communication tools, it also increasing becoming a political marketing tool (Santosa et al., 2018).

Yet, what is crucial here is that the science of political memes should emphasize the message that is intended for the present. If it is not, then a negative impact on the younger generation is most likely to occur. Aspects that must be considered at the time of the front include the analysis of information pertaining to political memes and the strength of its impact over the voters' decision. It has also become one of the most powerful tools in political marketing. Future studies should be analyzed on how political actors manipulate memes for their benefit as 2024 is an important year as general elections will happen in most of the countries.

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